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SECURITY INFORMATION

FOREWORD

This is a provisional estimate. The subjects herein treated will be taken into account in NIE-65, "Soviet Bloc Capabilities through 1957", and treated more fully in NIE-90, "Soviet Bloc Capabilities through Mid-1955".

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C E N T R A L I N T E L L I G E N C E A G E N C Y

10 March 1953

SE-39: PROBABLE CONSEQUENCES OF THE DEATH OF STALIN AND OF THE
ELEVATION OF MALENKOV TO LEADERSHIP IN THE USSR

I. THE INITIAL TRANSFER OF AUTHORITY

1. The problem of transfer of power is one of the most difficult which the Soviet system could face. The important initial step, the formal transfer of authority, with Malenkov as titular leader, has apparently been effected with remarkable rapidity and precision. The smoothness of the transfer of authority and the speed with which the Government and Party posts were filled, suggest an acute awareness on the part of the Soviet leaders of the dangers inherent in the situation,^{*} and that necessary plans to bring about the change were prepared, at least in outline, well in advance of Stalin's death.

* In the new organization, Malenkov apparently now holds the same titular position within the Presidium and the Secretariat of the Party and in the Council of Ministers which Stalin held. In the Council of Ministers, power has been concentrated in the hands of Malenkov as Chairman and four First Deputy Chairmen: Beria, Molotov, Bulganin, and Kaganovich. These five make up the Presidium of the Council of Ministers. It may be significant that this body closely parallels in nature and membership the wartime Committee of State Defense under Stalin. The concentration of power has been increased, and the top party and government organs have been reduced in number and size. The new organization of Party and Government and the extensive reorganization and merger of several major industries under Malenkov appear to tighten and streamline the administrative system.

2. Malenkov's key position in the Soviet Communist Party throughout the past fourteen years, his conspicuous and apparently planned elevation since 1948, his prominent role at and since the 19th Party Congress, and the accolade accorded him by Beria at Stalin's funeral suggest that there will be no immediate challenge to his position. However, we cannot estimate whether he has the qualities of leadership necessary to consolidate his position and to attain unchallenged power, since he has always operated with the backing of Stalin. Neither is it possible to estimate with confidence the capabilities or probable courses of action of his possible opponents.

3. A struggle for power could develop within the Soviet hierarchy at any time. Given the nature of the Soviet state, such a struggle would probably be carried on within the Party organization and higher echelons of the bureaucracy. In any case, the peoples of the USSR are unlikely to participate actively in the struggle. Even if a struggle should break out in the near future, we believe that the hold of the Communist Party over the USSR is not likely to be shaken quickly. We do not believe that such a struggle would in itself lead the rulers of the USSR deliberately to initiate general war.

* The Deputy Director for Intelligence, The Joint Staff, believes that paragraph 3 should read as follows: "A struggle for power could develop within the Soviet hierarchy at any time. Given the nature of the Soviet state, such a struggle would probably be carried on within the Party organization. However, any serious disagreement could well have much more widespread effects, involving the Army or large sections of the population. If such a struggle should break out in the near future, we believe that the hold of the Communist Party over the USSR is not likely to be shaken quickly. So long as the struggle is confined within the Party organization, we believe that the rulers of the USSR deliberately to initiate general war."

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II. PROBABLE CONSEQUENCES OF DEATH OF STALIN

A. Effects on the Bases of Soviet Power

4. The economic and military bases of Soviet power are unlikely to be immediately affected by Stalin's death. However, the new leadership may prove less successful in maintaining and strengthening these bases of Soviet power.

5. The effect of Western diplomatic or psychological moves on Soviet stability and strength cannot be estimated without knowledge of the contemplated moves. However, we believe that the USSR is politically more vulnerable today than before Stalin's death. The new leadership will have difficult policy decisions to face, and these difficulties may be increased by personal rivalries for power which would reduce Soviet strength and the cohesion of the international Communist movement.

B. Future Soviet Policies

6. In the near future, the new Soviet leadership will almost certainly pursue the foreign and domestic policies established during recent years. In particular, it will probably continue to emphasize unremitting hostility to the West (including the tactic of splitting the West), the enlargement of the Bloc

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economic base, and the increase of Bloc military power.

7. The death of Stalin removes an autocrat who, while ruthless and determined to spread Soviet power, did not allow his ambitions to lead him into reckless courses of action in his foreign policy. It would be unsafe to assume that the new Soviet regime will have Stalin's skill in avoiding general war. At least initially, the regime will also lack his freedom of action and his ability to manoeuvre, since it will not possess Stalin's immense prestige and authority. Specifically, in foreign policy, the new regime will probably find it more difficult to abandon positions than did Stalin and might feel itself compelled to react more strongly if moves of the West confronted it with the need for major decisions. Conversely, the new leadership will probably exercise caution in the near future in taking action which it thought would force the West to make comparable decisions. If the West should suggest re-examination of the principal issues which have divided East and West, the new Soviet government would probably adhere to established Soviet positions. However, the new government would probably show a less sure hand in dealing with

- 4 -

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new issues or in handling new Western proposals.

* The Deputy Director for Intelligence, The Joint Staff, believes that paragraph 7 should read: "The death of Stalin removes an autocrat who, while ruthless and determined to spread Soviet power, chose courses of action which although causing the Western world to rearm, did not result in general war during his lifetime. It would be unsafe to assume that the new Soviet leadership will either desire or be able to choose courses of action that will avoid precipitation of all-out war. At least initially, the Soviet regime may lack freedom of action and the ability to maneuver since he does not possess Stalin's immense prestige and authority. On the other hand particularly in relation to foreign policy, the new regime may find it more difficult to abandon positions than did Stalin and might feel itself compelled to react more strongly to moves of the West. If the West should suggest re-examination of the principal issues which have divided East and West, the new Soviet government would probably outwardly adhere to established Soviet positions."

- 42 -

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8. The new Soviet regime probably fears that, while it is in the process of consolidating its power, the West may make aggressive moves against the Bloc. It would probably view with extreme suspicion any new moves made by the West, particularly those involving long-range air forces or military forces close to the Bloc frontiers.

C. Effects upon the Peoples of the USSR

9. The death of Stalin removes the man who had been build up to the status of a demi-god. To many of the people of the USSR, he was the man of steel who had raised Russia to industrial and military power, who had withstood the German attack, and who had led the peoples of the USSR to the greatest military victory in Russian history. Stalin's death will be a psychological shock to large numbers of Soviet people. However, we estimate that this shock in itself will not affect the stability of the new regime.

D. Effect upon the Bloc and the International Communist Movement

10. For some time, no successor to Stalin will be able to achieve comparable status or similar significance as a symbol of the international Communist movement and as the undisputed leader of world Communism. This may have some effect on the

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rank and file, at least temporarily, but the cohesion of the hard core of the Communist movement outside the Bloc is not likely to be impaired. If there should be a struggle for power within the Soviet Communist Party, the cohesion of the Communist movement outside the Bloc would almost certainly be weakened.

11. Kremlin control over the European Satellites is so firm that we do not believe it will be impaired merely by the death of Stalin. However, in the unlikely event that a struggle in the Soviet Communist Party should spread to the Soviet Army and the Soviet Security Forces, Soviet control over the Satellites would almost certainly be shaken.

12. Relations between Tito and Moscow are unlikely to change as a result of the death of Stalin. The antagonism was not personal, but arose from a genuine clash of Yugoslav national interests with the Soviet Communist Party. Moreover, both sides have taken actions and adopted positions which would be extremely difficult to reverse. The Kremlin could not recognize Tito as an independent Communist ally without undermining its position with the European Satellites.

13. We do not believe that Tito's influence within the Satellites or within Communist Parties outside the Bloc will

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increase, unless there should be a prolonged struggle for power in the USSR.

14. We believe that Stalin's death will have no immediate effect upon Sino-Soviet cooperation or upon Chinese Communist foreign policies. However, no successor to Stalin will have prestige and authority in Asia comparable to his. The stature of Mao as leader and theoretician of Asian Communism will inevitably increase with the disappearance of the former supreme leader. Mao will almost certainly have more influence in the determination of Bloc policy affecting Asia. He almost certainly will not seek leadership of the international Communist movement. The new Moscow leadership will probably deal cautiously with Mao; if it does not, serious strains in Sino-Soviet relations will almost certainly develop.

III. PROBABLE WESTERN REACTION TO DEATH OF STALIN AND ELEVATION OF MALENKOV

15. We believe that in general the Western European leaders will be disposed for the time being to conduct the East-West struggle with greater hesitancy and caution. They will probably fear that any immediate Western pressure on the Bloc would increase the danger of war and facilitate the stabilization of

- 7 -

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authority in the USSR. They will also probably hope that, if Western pressure is not exerted, the problems involved in the consolidation of the authority of the new regime of the USSR will bring about at least a temporary relaxation of tensions and enable them to postpone disagreeable policy decisions.

- 8 -

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